

## Villainy of Human Nature in American Gothic Novels

Guibing Sun

School of International Studies, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan 114051,  
China

Mrsun\_ustl@163.com

### Abstract

Gothic novel is an important literary form in the history of American and English literature. Gothic novel is characterized by depicting mysterious and horrible stories. At the same time, we can find the embodiment of the villainy of human nature in American Gothic novels. The paper tries to present the villainy of human nature in some American Gothic novels.

### Keywords

Villainy, human nature, American Gothic novels.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Gothic novel

The term "Gothic novel" firstly comes from the English novelist Horace Walpole's work: *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. "Gothic novel is often set in a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels and the typical story focuses on the sufferings imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain, and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences. The principal aim was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors."<sup>1</sup>(Abrams, 2004) That is, Gothic novel or Gothic romance is a story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery. In an extended sense, many novels that do not have a medievalized setting, but they share a comparably sinister, grotesque, or claustrophobic atmosphere which have been classified as Gothic. It contributed to the new emotional climate of Romanticism. The reader can feel the Gothic atmosphere in the novels. Gothic novels are usually in a horror and terror setting; therefore, they always describe the villainy of human nature under the surrounding atmosphere, which we can see from some American novels.

#### 1.2 The development of Gothic novels

Gothic novel originated in the late 18th century and declined in the late 1830s. Despite such a short period of time, Gothic novel did thrive for a time and had a significant influence on many of the writers of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Generally, the development of Gothic novels can be divided into three stages. Early Gothic novels depict horror, ugliness and mystery, showing the author's interest in the middle ages. Such novels do not describe the minor things in our lives, but the extraordinary events that occurred in the middle ages. The early representative masterpieces are Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*.

The Gothic novels of the 19th century describes the origin of terror as the soul of man. The castle was without beauty, the villain and the hero, all of which were found in the depths of the human soul. All the work explain the problem that fear comes from the heart of man. The representative masterpieces are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

The third period of Gothic novels moved to the United States. The works of this period focused on the mysterious events, narrating modern stories in a gloomy atmosphere, exploring the shortcomings and darkness of the human soul. This is the psychological origin of modern Gothic novels. The representative masterpieces are William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*.

## 2. Villainy of human nature in American Gothic novels

### 2.1 The embodiment of the Villainy of human nature in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*

*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is one of the most famous works by Washington Irving, which is one of the works in his *The Sketch Book*. "Sleepy Hollow is renowned for its ghosts and the haunting atmosphere that pervades the imaginations of its inhabitants and visitors."<sup>2</sup>(Feng Yujun,2016)The book touched the American imagination and foreshadowed the coming of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, in whose hands the short story attained a degree of perfection as a literary tradition. It also marked the beginning of American Romanticism. The Gothic, the supernatural, and the longing for the good old days which some of its pieces clearly exhibit, are Romantic enough in subject if not exactly in style, as Irving wrote in the neoclassical tradition of Joseph Addison and Oliver Goldsmith. Looking at a picture of Irving surrounded by his other writers, one does sometimes think of the old man, benign and pleasant and refined, as the uncle of American authors. However, from this works, on the one hand, we can feel the beautiful country scenery that Irving has described for us. On the other hand, we can also feel the evil side of human nature from the protagonist Ichabod Crane.

"The pedagogue's mouth watered as he looked upon this sumptuous promise of luxurious winter fare. In his devouring mind's eye, he pictured to himself every roasting---pig running about with a pudding in his belly, and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cozily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce.....ask while living." "As the enraptured Ichabod fancied all this, and as he rolled his great green eyes over the fat meadow lands, the rich fields of wheat, of rye.....---or the Lord knows where!". From these lines, we can see that Ichabod is very avaricious. He hopes that he can get the property from the rich villager. Therefore, he is very purposeful and he knows clearly what he should do to achieve his goal.

"From the moment Ichabod laid his eyes upon these regions of delight, the peace of his mind was at an end, and his only study was how to gain the affections of the peerless daughter of Van Tassel." At the same time, Ichabod is very hypocritical. "He repaid them in kind with large extracts from his invaluable author, Cotton Mather, and added many marvelous events that had taken place in his native State of Connecticut, and fearful sights which he had seen in his nightly walks about Sleepy Hollow.", we can find that he is very proud that he can attract the attentions of people in the village. However, when he goes home, "All the stories of ghosts and goblins that he had heard in the afternoon now came crowding upon his recollection. The night grew darker and darker; the stars seemed to sink deeper in the sky, and driving clouds occasionally hid them from his sight. He had never felt so lonely and dismal. He was, moreover, approaching the very place where many of the scenes of the ghost stories had been laid. " From the description above, we can see that he is frightened as thinking about the stories he has told to the villagers. But at that time when he told the stories to the villagers, he wanted to get their attentions and satisfied his vanity. We may see in Ichabod Crane a precocious, effete New Englander, shrewd, commercial, a city slicker, who is rather an interloper, a somewhat destructive force, in village life, and who comes along to swindle the villagers. He is driven away from where he does not belong, so that the serene village remains permanently good and happy.

### 2.2 The embodiment of the Villainy of human nature in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Edagar Allan Poe is a well-known American poet and writer in the history of American literature. The most important literature theory of Allan Poe is "Effect Theory". Poe tries to create an effect before his writing and he creates his works just according to this effect. Therefore, in the initial sentence of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a long periodic leads the reader right into the story of "the melancholy House of Usher." It is obvious that "melancholy" is to be the tone of the story (to say the least) , and that tone is set from the very outset by the few words which Poe chose carefully to place on the first page. Words like "insufferable gloom," "desolate or terrible," "bleak walls," "vacant eye-like windows," "decayed trees," "depression of soul," "iciness," and "dreariness" serve to establish the gloomy and dreadful atmosphere of the story admirably well. The story happens on a

dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year. The environment is gloomy and depressive at that time and the house is a Gothic one, so Poe creates an atmosphere of sadness and depression.

The whole story is narrated in agonizing suspense: Roderick and his sister (in effect his double), the corruption of his mind and the disintegration of his house, and the narrator apparently loses his own reason in his friend's presence---all these contribute to the single effect the author wants the tale to produce on the reader: the disintegration and annihilation of a human mind. Just as the description above, Edgar Allan Poe wanted to reveal the evil side of human nature. Even though Poe did not say it clearly, we can feel that there is an abnormal relationship between the brother and the sister in the novel---incest, which reflects the lust of human nature of Roderick Usher. At the same time, as the illness of Roderick's sister and the abnormal relationship between them, Roderick finally chose to "put her living in the tomb." "He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin---to the severe and long---continued illness---indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution--of a tenderly beloved sister---his sole companion for long years---his last and only relative on earth. 'Her decease,' he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, 'would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.'" He wanted to cover his sin, so he did bury his sister living.

From the analysis above, we can clearly find the nightmarish world of Poe's inner heart and his struggling in that society.

### **2.3 The embodiment of the Villainy of human nature in *The Minister's Black Veil* (A Parable)**

Hawthorne was a well-known American Romanticism novelist in the nineteenth century. And *The Minister's Black Veil* is one of his best short novels among all his works. The Black Veil in this novel symbolizes the sin of human. Young Hawthorne was intensely aware of the misdeeds of his Puritan ancestors, and this awareness led to his understanding of evil being at the core of human life, "that blackness in Hawthorne," as Herman Melville put it. All his life, Hawthorne seems to be haunted by his sense of sin and evil in life. Although Hawthorne is ambiguous and his tales are often capable of more than one interpretation, he is certainly at his best when writing about evil. Most of his works deal with evil one way or another. The blackness of vision which comes as a natural corollary has become his trade mark. However, the purpose of *The Minister's Black Veil* is to tell people that everyone has the secret sin in his or her heart, which refers to the evil side of the human nature.

The purpose of the minister wearing the black veil is to let people know the evil side that everyone has, and people should not be hypocritical. As known in the works, "Mr. Hooper had the reputation of a good preacher, but not an energetic one: he strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences, rather than drive them thither by the thunders of the Word. The sermon which he now delivered was marked by the same characteristics of style and manner as the general series of his pulpit oratory. But there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor's lips. It was tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper's temperament. The subject had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them. A subtle power was breathed into his words. Each member of the congregation, the most innocent girl, and the man of hardened breast, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them, behind his awful veil, and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought. Many spread their clasped hands on their booms." We can see it easily that "There was nothing terrible in what Mr. Hooper said, at least, no violence; and yet, with every tremor of his melancholy voice, the hearers quaked. An unsought pathos came hand in hand with awe," but everybody feels something wrong in the sermon that the preacher said. Meanwhile, from the last sentences by Mr. Hooper "Why do you tremble at me alone?" cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. "Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it

obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and lo! On every visage a Black Veil!” we can reach the conclusion that the minister just wanted to tell people to admit their evil side and not to discriminate others who have committed some wrong things. In this novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne paid much attention to describe the sins which were intolerable for social ethics and he wanted to tell us that it is not someone that has the secret sin, but everybody has the secret sin and we must admit it.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on the strange atmosphere, terror and nervous event description, using exaggerate bizarre surreal, Gothic novel describes the story and highlights the darkness of human nature and social decay. From these American Gothic novels, we can see the villainy of human nature, and the Gothic novels aim to present us the evil side of human nature and let us know the evil side existing in human nature. It makes us clearly know the problems existing in the society. It was an important literary genre in English and American literature, which had an important influence on its development.

### References

- [1]Abrams M H.A glossary of Literature Terms [M].Beijing:Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press,2004.
- [2]Chang Yaixin.A Survey of American Literature[M].Tianjin:Nankai University Press,2008.
- [3]Feng Yujun&Wang Yan.The Romantic Prototype of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow [J]. Overseas English,2016(8).

Gothic literature is a deliciously terrifying blend of fiction and horror with a little romance thrown in. The Gothic novel has a long history, and although it has changed since 1765 when it began with Walpole's *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, it has maintained certain classic Gothic romantic elements, through Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818 and Stoker's infamous *Dracula* of 1897, until today, with authors like Stephen King. Southern Gothic is a sub-genre of American Gothic fiction set in the South that uses ironic and macabre characters and scenes to highlight the South's implicit values and beliefs. So the purpose of Southern Gothic literature is to address the underlying social and cultural issues of the South, and this makes it slightly more political than American Gothic literature in general. Gothic novel, European Romantic pseudomedieval fiction having a prevailing atmosphere of mystery and terror. Its heyday was the 1790s, but it underwent frequent revivals in subsequent centuries. The first Gothic novel in English was Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1765). Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree. See Article History. Gothic novel, European Romantic pseudomedieval fiction having a prevailing atmosphere of mystery and terror. Walpole's novel was wildly popular, and his novel introduced most of the stock conventions of the genre: an intricate plot; stock characters; subterranean labyrinths; ruined castles; and supernatural occurrences. In its attention to the dark side of human nature and the chaos of irrationality, the Gothic provides for contemporary readers some insight into the social and intellectual climate of the time in which the literature was produced. A time of revolution and reason, madness and sanity, the 1750s through the 1850s provided the stuff that both dreams and nightmares were made of. The first American novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, was born into a Quaker family in Philadelphia on January 17, 1771.